

Truce signed in state water wars

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SACRAMENTO — Seeking to end two decades of California water wars, Gov. Pete Wilson and U.S. Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt yesterday cemented a landmark agreement to balance the competing water needs of farmers, cities and the environment.

If it works as intended, the accord will

cost Southern California precious water, but less than federal environmental agencies proposed.

In return, officials say, it will make water supplies in urban areas of Southern California reliable enough to assure residents and water-intensive businesses that they will not be left high and dry.

Experts and officials of cities, environmental groups and agriculture had negotiated with each other and with state and

federal regulators since July. They were closeted in intense meetings most of this week in an effort to meet yesterday's court-ordered deadline for a plan.

The agreement to save the declining Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta was described as historic, unprecedented and a triumph.

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Water

Pact described as boon to families, farmers, fish

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"I think it is a major victory for consensus over confrontation," Wilson said at a signing ceremony attended by Babbitt and Carol Browner, administrator of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

"I think it signals a cease-fire in the water wars that have too long plagued California," the governor said.

Said Babbitt: "Implicit in this agreement is the recognition that there is room in this extraordinary state ... for a vibrant urban and industrial economy, for the richest and the most productive agriculture in the United States of America, and for a sustainable, healthy environment."

Browner put it most succinctly: "We have a plan that meets the needs of the families, the farmers and the fish."

Water flows into the 738,000-acre delta, with its 700 miles of canals, from the north from the Sacramento River, and from the south in the San Joaquin River.

Environmental groups say pumping delta water south, which began in the late 1960s, and heavy pump-

ing during the 1987-92 drought have brought the winter-run chinook salmon and the delta smelt to the brink of extinction.

The pumps kill some young fish, send others down aqueducts and out of the delta, and divert many more away from their destinations, often to linger in holding bays where they are eaten by predators.

The pact attempts to make water supplies to Southern California more reliable by making environmental regulation in the delta more predictable.

Southern California water officials feared a series of new pumping restrictions to protect endangered species might turn 1995 from an ample water year into a time of "regulatory drought."

Under the pact, the federal government promises to make up the difference if a future Endangered Species Act listing requires diverting more water for California's environment. If a listing is unavoidable, Babbitt said, the water "would be acquired by the federal government at (the federal government's) cost."

Federal environmental agencies urged that urban Southern California and other south-of-the-delta users be forced to give up 25 percent of their delta water supplies during drought years to save the declining fish. Up to half of San Diego's water comes from the delta.

Instead, the three-year plan

signed yesterday requires southern users to give up about 16 percent more of their delta supplies than they were required to give up in drought years under the state's 1978 delta operating plan.

State water agencies had tried to update the plan twice since then, only to be overwhelmed by lawsuits and political power plays.

During normal and wet years, however, the new agreement says southern cities and farms will have to leave 32 percent more water in the delta than they had jointly proposed.

"You can think of it as using water for the fish more efficiently ... exactly when the fish need it to help their migration or to keep them away from the pumps," said Lester Snow, general manager of the San Diego County Water Authority and one of the principal spokesmen for urban and agricultural water interests.

Tom Graff, senior attorney at the Environmental Defense Fund, also was positive.

"We believe that for the three years that this agreement will be set in stone, the provisions of the agreement will preserve endangered species," he said.

The southern water users also agreed to spend \$10 million a year for three years to finance conservation programs, such as providing fish screens to keep farming irrigation systems that tap the Sacra-

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mento River and the delta itself from killing uncounted thousands of young salmon and smelt.

At the last minute Wednesday, Babbitt telephoned John Wodraska, general manager of the Los Angeles-based Metropolitan Water District, to suggest a show of good faith.

Wodraska, in effect, wrote a \$10 million check against Metropolitan's funds as what he later called "seed money" to start the conservation work.

He said California's \$750 billion economy depends on the reliability of water to farms and other businesses that want to expand, relocate or stay in the state.

Standard and Poor's bond rating service this year added to the pressure to solve the delta puzzle by warning that bond ratings of Metropolitan and other water agencies might be downgraded — costing ratepayers extra tens of millions of dollars when building new waterworks — if no solution were found.

Agreement of a large chunk of the state's politically powerful Central Valley agricultural community was called a key in achieving the accord.

Dan Nelson of the San Luis-Delta Mendota Water Authority said the five or more years in which farms have received no more than half their normal state water supplies have "created a tremendous amount of uncertainty and instabili-



Common ground: Gov. Pete Wilson (right) watches as U.S. Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt signs a water agreement, which Wilson called "a cease-fire in the water wars."

ty" for farmers when fragile species demanded more water.

"This agreement doesn't solve California's and specifically agriculture's water supply shortages," Nelson said. "But this is the foundation that we all needed to build on."

Still to be negotiated, for example, are "take limits," maximums of salmon, smelt and other fish that will be allowed to be killed in and

near huge state and federal pur-

Twenty million people and more than a million irrigated acres on water pumped through the Central Valley by the federal Central Valley Project and the State Water Project.

Perhaps the most difficult steps will be a series of state and federal board hearings on water allocation and water rights. They will follow next year.